When the Lights Are Turned On

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Chapter 1

Autumn was brilliant, with leaves falling as if they were parading the final breath of summer, trying to ignore the harsh reality of life—where everything, sooner or later, must join the red army of autumn. Any attempt by bright colors to capture his gaze had failed, faced with the ignorance and silence in which most of his feelings seemed to hide—feelings that contrasted with his true values, which had been carefully nurtured by his past and still guided him in the present.

Paolo approached a nearby oak tree and hugged it warmly, as if he had known this old tree for years. He felt more anxious than usual. Something was wrong with his dreams. He had been seeing them every single night since the moment he came across that intriguing girl playing the guitar in the quiet park, surrounded by leaves tinged with the red hues of autumn.

But now he was the one to play the guitar in this quiet park.

His guitar was singing as mournfully as anyone could play on Earth, carrying with it all those sounds that added

their natural accompaniment to his music. It made him feel like a stranger, coloring his own sadness with all those notes he played.

Moment later, he noticed a girl watching him carefully, trying to catch every sound he made—as if it wasn't something ordinary, but something fantastically underrated by the inhabitants of Earth.

After her intense gaze, she approached his inspired silhouette, captured by red, yellow, and orange leaves swirling around this humble musician, who played so mournfully—as if he were trying to surprise God itself.

"Your music sounds so inspiring, as if it were the last melody on planet Earth! I'm serious," she added, casting a serious gaze that made his cheeks flush with color.

"Thank you so much! I truly appreciate your kind words about my humble personality. I feel more connected with this universe now," his voice trembled slightly, as if it was gently broken by the compliment.

Suddenly, she touched his cheek with her warm palm, causing his voice to mumble some indistinct words—the meaning of which he couldn't understand. The whole world seemed to transform into a single dancing arena, with only two red leaves swirling around them. All he remembered were her hands embracing him

passionately and gently, as if their meeting had been foreseen by God Himself. Then, both of them fell to the nearby park ground, each breath echoing softly between them.

She kissed him passionately, her tongue exploring his, tasting the exhilarating rush of this newfound craziness. They breathed quickly, unconcerned if someone might see them, lost in their shared sensation, trusting only in this moment to be the greatest they had ever known.

Suddenly, at the last moment, she burst into a striking laugh, gently pushing away his guitar and reaching out to touch his tongue with hers.

"Oh, my little boy! I think you're surprised, aren’t you?"

Her voice sounded ironic, as if they had known each other for centuries.

"I have no idea what to say," he mumbled again, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He stared at her foolishly, dullly, like a silly boy expecting to be scolded by his mother for his bad grades at secondary school.

At the same moment, he felt his arms being tied, and his head fainted. The wind blew into his face, carrying many colorful leaves that seemed to laugh at him. It appeared unlikely that his previous emotions had made him so

stressed out before. It was a mixture of feelings: on one hand, Paolo was sweetly imprisoned by the falling leaves spinning around him, recalling his joy; on the other hand, his true sensations were captivated by the magic voice coming from the girl sitting nearby, as she stroked his hair.

"Now you are going to sleep, my little boy," she whispered, still caressing his hair as gently and tenderly as if she were his mother singing a lullaby. The moment felt unrealistically clear, as if all his neighborhood and the fall trees were calling his attention more than his rational mind could grasp. He refused to believe that it possessed his entire body and mind, and the girl’s blue eyes penetrated him deeply, as vast and open as a cloudless sky.

At the next moment, he found himself lying on a cold surface, with no guitar nearby. It was still fall, but less colorful and bright. Something had definitely happened. But what? He felt completely disoriented and abandoned on this cold, promising yet disillusioned grass. "Where is the girl? I didn't even call her name. Where am I?" He stood up, stepped forward, and looked around. Everything was nearly the same, but the trees were now bare. "Who took my guitar? Was I drunk?" These questions stormed through his mind, sharp, unexpected,

and aggressive. Yet, the sky remained clear, just like the girl’s eyes.

He hurried out of the park, circling the area in an attempt to find his guitar. There were no traces that could more or less indicate its location. The people walking back and forth seemed unusual—more indifferent than preoccupied or stressed out as they usually appeared. Their faces looked almost emotionless.

He reached a nearby bus stop and approached the first person he saw to ask for the time.

"Sorry, what time is it? I'm wondering if it's still too late or too early..." he said, but he was stunned by what had just escaped his mouth.

To his surprise, the people around him responded in a completely different language—one that sounded like a mixture of Arabic and Latin. As a result, his request went unanswered. He refused to believe it again. He asked different pedestrians the same question, but they all looked at him as if he had fallen from another planet, their faces blank and their language entirely unfamiliar.

"What's going on here? Who are all these people?" he tried to scream, but his voice was drowned out by the crowd's noise, as if it were just a quiet bee buzzing in an ocean of lives.

Suddenly, a very familiar sound reached his ears—soft guitar music. Its gentle notes spread around him, and their sound, like the waves of the sea, seemed to draw closer and closer to his presence.

"Is this the melody I used to play just a few hours ago?" he wondered. He hurried toward the place where he had first heard the music. As he approached, he was stunned, mesmerized by what he saw. It was the girl he used to kiss in the park. She had taken his guitar and was playing his melody. He nearly leapt with joy.

"Finally, I found you! It's me—don't you recognize me?" he called out, hoping for an immediate response. But the girl kept playing, smiling, and kept an eye on some distant objects, seemingly paying no attention to Paolo.

"I can't believe it. She's not recognizing me at all," his heart pounding like a thousand little hammers echoing in his mind. Suddenly, some people who looked like local police, speaking in their barbaric language, stepped in. They seized him, tied his hands, and he didn't even manage to say a word. The next thing he knew, he fainted.

In the next moment, he found himself lying on the floor of a police office cell.

The old blinking lamp swayed gently above his face, casting flickering shadows that danced across the cold, bare walls of the cell.

His cellmates looked at him surprisingly while speaking in their unfamiliar language. He couldn't understand a single word, which made him feel completely confused and stressed out. Suddenly, one of his cellmates took a guitar and started playing. At that moment, Paolo felt like he was losing his mind. The same melody spread its waves throughout the cell. In some instances, he recognized his own guitar in the hands of that man.

"Hey, you! You can't use my guitar! Give it back to me!" he shouted, rushing toward the man in an attempt to reclaim his guitar. But at the same time, the entire cell erupted into a fight. Within seconds, his guitar shattered into pieces, and Paolo tried to choke his cellmate with the bronze string. The man was coughing uselessly, struggling to free himself from Paolo's grip.

The next moment, two police officers entered the cell to calm everyone down. Paolo was taken outside and placed near the officer's desk. They planned a little investigation, he thought.

But instead, the nurse entered the police office with a syringe in her hand, ready to give an injection. Her face

was covered by a mask. The others followed her example and also covered their faces with medical masks.

The nurse reached Paolo as quickly as she entered, sharply grabbing his arm and preparing to inject. Paolo tensed up, and at the next moment, he noticed the officer giving a command to inject, as sharply as if he was ordering to fire a gun. The nurse's warm breath was both seducing and intimidating, but her intentions made Paolo feel sober and calm quite soon. He pushed her away and ran toward the entrance.

The entire police office was shaken by a huge bang, or so it seemed to him as he fled. The next moment, he felt himself falling into cold water, with great splashes spreading around him.

Hopefully, the coast was nearby, and he reached it quite soon. Everything looked like a nightmare, and he refused to believe that it was really happening. But at least he was safe, wringing out his wet clothes and trying to breathe steadily.

He looked around, and what he saw made him tremble. All the people were walking back and forth, their faces covered by brilliant masks that illuminated in the harsh sunlight. Oh, Gosh. Their foreheads bore numbers!

Chapter 2

Paolo rushed forward to one of those masked people, trying to clarify what epoch and place he was fantastically situated in, but his mind still refused to believe what was happening around him.

"Sorry. May I ask for your attention, please? What a day today?" he addressed the first man standing next to him.

The man seemed not to speak any human language but merely looked at him and pointed to his forehead, which strangely illuminated with the figure 6.

"Are you crazy, man?" Paolo was still seeking an appropriate way to ask questions but felt that his patience was rapidly running out.

The man pointed to his forehead once again, then ran away. The sun was scorching, and even Paolo's wet clothes dried unexpectedly quickly. Suddenly, another man with a bronze string around his neck approached Paolo, but after seeing him, he jumped back immediately as if it was the scariest nightmare he'd ever seen.

"What's wrong with you?" Paolo was shocked by such a reaction.

"And why does everybody wear these stupid masks?"

There weren t any cars no even buses nearby.

The sky seemed to be covered by a dome, which, in turn, made the atmosphere unbearably hot and stuffy. Simultaneously, some people were firing their guns and proclaiming actions that resembled a local revolution—people protesting to keep their rights to wear their masks.

While those distant ones tried to remove their masks, the crazed individuals were desperately fighting for their right to remain masked. In a few moments, Paolo noticed a familiar girl, looking like a nurse, running around with her syringe, administering injections to people who seemed completely happy and relaxed during the process.

"What is going on here?" Paolo was shocked and tried to find answers as soon as the questions flooded his mind.

From time to time, the dome would open, revealing the crazy inhabitants of this unknown city. Its green eye shimmered, illuminating the entire neighborhood.

They definitely must be mad—or maybe it's just a dream, and he’s a prisoner of it. Paolo refused to believe this new reality he had just encountered.

But the dome was already closing, and it seemed that two hundred human voices cried out for freedom.

The next moment, Paolo made up his mind to slip away unless he was noticed and injected. He still felt sober about the last occasions taking place in a police cell.

He dashed forward to a nearby shelter where many volunteers had gathered, those who used to remove the illuminated masks from the faces of their victims. More than two hundred masks had already been carefully brought inside the shelter. These volunteers looked tired, sweaty, and their skin was bleeding from all the tests they had to endure.

Paolo joined them, asking for a glass of water, but nobody reacted to him—surprisingly—except for one who approached him as soon as he entered this ruined shelter.

"They won't answer you, but I will. You know what..." he surprisingly spoke in a language Paolo was able to understand.

"There will be no water unless the dome opens and it rains." His words sounded menacing and intimidating.

"They took all the water and provisions from us..."

At the next moment, Paolo became more confused and scared by everything that had happened in the past two hours of his life.

"Thank God! At least you're the one who speaks my language here..." he sighed, hugging the stranger, feeling a strong connection to reality.

Luigi was the name of the young man who, as it later turned out, had escaped from the same cell as Paolo. He was strongly attached to his memories of the past and seemed unable to escape from them. He used to be an engineer working on a brilliant project designed to connect his provincial city to its suburbs. But after he succeeded in completing it, he resigned—without any explanation...

He couldn't recall much more from his memory. All he knew was that he had fainted and was now here.

Two more things began to tremble in Paolo’s mind. He felt the aggression increasing within his muscles as Luigi’s story reached its climax—when his new friend revealed the true reason behind all those people in masks and their strong reluctance to remove them.

"These demons persistently make us accept their rules," said Luigi. "First, they deprived us of our freedom, and now they want to take what’s left of it..." He spat on the ground and frowned, his face twisted with anger.

The dome opened, and heavy rain began to pour down.

Chapter 3

The police officer sat in his chair, twisting his arms nervously. A nurse stood in front of him, ready to give a report.

"So, he reached that place you mentioned?" he asked, drumming his fingers on the table before falling silent.

"Yes. After he escaped from here, he led himself to that secret door. And now he’s faced the other one who knows enough about our plans," the nurse’s voice sounded like raindrops pouring steadily onto the officer’s face.

"Give me one more injection," the officer requested, and the nurse immediately complied. Afterward, he reached out and pulled her hand, unbuttoning her shirt. He then immersed himself in the comfort of her two full, sweet-smelling breasts.

At the same time, in a world where Paolo was caught in heavy rain, strange female screams echoed through the air, blending with the storm's roar. The masked people grew more anxious, attempting to remove their masks to share a kiss, but they were unable to do so. It seemed as though a brief moment of enlightenment had touched their beings, illuminating their true selves, yet the darkest parts of their souls still remained dominant.

"Do you see that?" Luigi screamed, pulling Paolo’s hand and trying to get him out of there, just as the entire building collapsed overhead.

They barely managed to escape as a loud rumble erupted from behind. The place that just two seconds earlier had been a shelter was now crumbling under its own walls.

Simultaneously, the female screams ceased, and the dome of the sky closed as swiftly as it had opened just moments earlier. The raindrops transformed instantly into a ripe harvest, and the masked inhabitants rushed forward to gather it for food. But they couldn't even remove their masks, which seemed to have grown firmly onto their faces.

"You see? They can't even eat it until they receive another injection—one that always suppresses their physiological desire to keep on living..." Luigi looked as if he was trying to silence that unbearable female voice, the one that had turned his life into an unending concentration camp.

At the same time, an attractively dressed nurse approached the starving people and administered them an injection. Instantly, they lost consciousness and began to laugh uncontrollably, as if they had been released from a madhouse.

"We have to get out of here until this nurse gets us seduced. " Luigi said. They hurried up from that place trying to save their own freedom.

While the crowds of starving people were reaching out the injection like a manna from heaven our friends were distancing themselves as far as possible. Finally the sounds from behind vanished and they found themselves standing near the river.

"So, now what?" Paolo asked, trying to catch his breath after such a long and exhausting journey. Moments later, the river turned red, and our travelers had no idea how to cross this flaming waters. Suddenly, the nurse’s loud laughter echoed across the horizon, reminiscent of a siren’s song that sailors might hear in fairy tales.

"What are you waiting for, idiot?" shouted Luigi, glaring at Paolo, who seemed mesmerized by the beautiful, seductive voice growing louder and nearer.

"Suit yourself, but I’m not staying here," Luigi declared, then leapt into the crimson water. No sooner had he submerged himself than he dissolved into it.

Paolo stood frozen, shocked and unable to move or comprehend what had just happened.

He tried to escape from this screaming prison, but his feet sank into the ground, rendering him unable to move. Meanwhile, the nurse was approaching him closer and closer until finally she embraced him with her seductive laugh. Paolo obediently remained on his feet, immovable.

Within the next few seconds, he saw the dome opening, and it began to rain heavily. The nurse unbuttoned his trousers, and in a matter of moments, he was inside her like a rushing river, their bodies moving as if the whole world were watching them.

Her eyes pierced into his until he fainted. As he was falling into his dream, he managed to read the figures on her forehead: 2032. He also heard her enchanting voice saying:

"You've escaped from our prison. You seemed stronger than we expected. Our police officer is still looking for you to arrest you. But I got you first, I guess."

Then he saw all the biblical prophets who were killed for their prophecies. They all seemed to address him as one:

"Don't let this world break you... Your soul is the only thing that can defeat every demon within. Those who wear masks have lost themselves and have no faces anymore. Their daily bread is their fears, paralyzing their

will. Leave them alone. You're not meant to save their lives. But never forget about God. That officer is Satan. If you call God's name, all their plans will be ruined in an instant."

After saying this, the prophets disappeared.

Paolo summoned his last strength and cried out:

"Lord, have mercy on me. Lord, have mercy on me. Lord, have mercy on me."

At the same moment, he saw the nurse screaming and transforming into a demonic shape.

The next moment, he opened his eyes.

Moment later, he noticed a girl watching him carefully, trying to catch every sound he made—as if it wasn't something ordinary, but something fantastically underrated by the inhabitants of Earth.

After her intense gaze, she approached his inspired silhouette, captured by red, yellow, and orange leaves swirling around this humble musician, who played so mournfully—as if he were trying to surprise God itself.

"Your music sounds so inspiring, as if it were the last melody on planet Earth! I’m serious," she added, casting a serious gaze that made his cheeks flush with color.

"Thank you so much! I truly appreciate your kind words about my humble personality. I feel more connected with this universe now," his voice trembled slightly, as if it was gently broken by the compliment.

"What is the year now?" he asked, trying not to ruin the moment that connected him to the present.

The girl smiled and looked at him with her blue eyes, as if trying to appear even more attractive.

"Now we are in 2033," she answered.

Paolo sighed loudly. "Thank God it was all a dream."

"What dream?" the girl asked him, confused.

Paolo smiled and continued playing the guitar happily. The girl sat nearby, listening intently to his inspiring melody.